A Child's Story of American Literature

VIII. The Two Websters.

By ALGERNON TASSIN and ARTHUR BARTLETT MAURICE.

DO you know what would have happened if you had been born the last year of the Revolutionary War, like Daniel Webster? You would have gone to a bookless school. For many years children born after 1780 had no books to study from. Do you wonder that many of them grew up without learning to read?

Before the war all the school books had been made in England. For a time the younger children used hand-me-downs from the older children. But with the carefullest handling possible they naturally wore out by and by. Then there came a day when the teacher and the pupils were all at school, and there were no books whatever.

Still, if you had seen the school books they used before the war you might possibly prefer none at all. But that would only mean that you were using your to-day eyes, not your historical ones. You would be looking at the past in the light of the future, which had not yet arrived. Unless people are very careful this is a fault they always fall into. It is what some people a hundred years from now will be saying about us. "Poor things!" they will say. "How do you suppose they could have managed with their slow-poke airplanes and telephones; and just fancy having to dig mines in the earth for something to keep themselves warm with and cutting down all their trees for paper to write upon! Poor creatures, how hard life must have been!" But, naturally, since we don't know what is coming we don't feel deprived at all in being forced to get along without it. On the contrary, we are quite happy in doing now just what they will be doing then, comparing our advantages with those of people in the past and thinking how much better off we are now. Just so they were doing then with those Colonial school books, which you might think were worse than none at all.

Noah Webster.

They were almost exclusively religious in character and in content. And the religion of the Puritans, you remember, was very stern and grim. Even in a Sunday school children are not drilled in the catechism as they once were, but how would you like to study reading and writing and spelling from a book written like the catechism and dealing only with religious and theological subjects? Do you think that learning how to spell Nebuchadnezzar would help much in your daily life? Yet this is the sort of thing little boys and girls cut their school teeth on then. It would have been far better to do it on Mother Goose. And there was Mother Goose all the time, if they had not felt that in school you must be learning theology and the alphabet together. Are you not surprised to hear that you have already become thoroughly acquainted with some literature published during the Colonial period? And that such a gay irresponsible little dandelion as Mother Goose could blossom out of that flinty time when people thought that children should set about wrestling with God to save their souls from the fires of hell at the age of three?

After the Revolution they saw at once that they must write some text books of their own. Naturally, they did not want to send over to England for a new stock. Naturally, too, the English text books contained many things they did not want their children to learn. The histories, for instance, would call them rebels, while they called themselves patriots. Just before the Civil war the same condition of affairs existed in the South. "We must write our own text books," cried a Southern magazine passionately in 1850. "We cannot have our children learn to read in books that condemn their fathers for doing what we think is right and proper." So it was that after the Revolution, Americans began to make their own school books. And as there were now none at all, they began to make them in great numbers.

II.

Nothing which tries to satisfy a general need, however, can be really new. Most people cling to the old, and anything entirely new, even if it is to meet an entirely new situation, would shock and offend those persons who are not able to go as fast as the others. Consequently, these books were largely old as well as partly new. The main thing about the old books was that they had clung to the idea that the school must be only the servant of the Church. So when the new geographies were written, they began, as likely as not with Moses exploring the Red Sea; and the natural histories described the sort of whale that could swallow Jonah alive. Most people nowadays, whatever they feel about the Bible, are willing to admit that stories of miracles are not the sort of thing to put into books which try to explain the world as it is. The new books, too, kept on trying to implant theology in the minds of children. The Republic was ten years old when Bryant was born. By the time he went to school, the new text books were out. "I was an excellent, almost an infallible speller, and ready in geography," he wrote, "but in the Catechism, not understanding the abstract terms, I made little progress." And if he couldn't understand them, you may be sure no other child could. Worst of all, as we think nowadays, the books still retained the Puritan notion that children should hear as soon as possible how dreadful the world was. The histories were enlivened with pictures of Indian massacres and burnings at the stake; the geographies had cheerful cuts of boa-constrictors crushing the life out of men on horseback; and there were many appetizing problems in arithmetic. Here is one of them. "A human body, if baked until all the moisture is evaporated, is reduced in weight as 10 to 1. A body that weighs 100 pounds when living weighs how much when baked?"

Yet, notwithstanding all this, there was a great advance on the old. A magazine in 1825 said: "Of all the improvements in which this age abounds, none are more manifest or more important than such as relate to elementary education. What has generally been made a loathsome task has been converted into a pleasure. Everything has been done to encourage the learner." For this great improvement Noah Webster was chiefly responsible.

III.

If the young Bryant was an almost infallible speller, he was something which no grown-up man was at the time. He had Noah Webster's Spelling Book to thank for that. Not until he had written it was there any real uniformity in spelling. In the same letter, men of the highest education would spell the same word in several different ways. It was just as if they said: "There, take your choice, one of them is bound to be right." There was the same lack of uniformity, though to a less degree, in England. Noah Webster's attempt to regularize spelling in America reacted on British spelling also. They did not adopt many of the changes he advocated, but his example caused a greater uniformity than had existed previously. How was that, then, for an infant American? For the Spelling Book may be said to be the very first book published in the new United States.

While soldiering during the war he taught school when the army was in quarters. As he found no books in this school he made one. He called it "First Part of the Grammatical Institute of the English Language," and for twenty years it went by this ponderous name. But the name quite misrepresented his main idea, for he was our first simplified speller. "I am convinced," he said, "that sense and convenience will sooner or later get the better of the present absurd practice in spelling. It is now the work of years for children to learn to spell; and, after all, the business is rarely accomplished." He tried to leave out all the silent letters and to spell according to sound. We have not yet adopted this part of his wise idea of spelling—don't you wish we had? You cannot, therefore, blame the people of a hundred years ago for clinging to any of the absurd practices of the past when we are doing the same thing. Your historical eyes should see both ways, you know; and suppose you use them the next time you are tempted to blame anybody in the past.

IV.

He did not get his ideas of spelling all at once, or even venture to put them before the public when he got them. It was only the extraordinary success of the Spelling Book which prepared the way. It created the same sort of craze that the new singing by note had done in the later Colonial days. To their singing schools all the villages now added spelling bees. Beginning with a sale of two hundred thousand a year, he sold twenty-four million copies before he died. When he saw his success he set about a more pretentious work. Indeed, nothing in that day or even in this could possibly be more pretentious. To-day we would have a hundred people working on what he accomplished single handed. An American Dictionary of the English Language! When he finished it he said he now intended to make "a complete and comprehensive one," although you might have thought this was complete enough to satisfy anybody, since it contained five thousand more words than the great dictionary which the English Dr. Johnson had made not so many years before. For twenty years he worked on his new dictionary, and he was working on his first revision of it when death took the pen out of his hand in 1843.

People who wanted to cling to the old were scandalized at his impudence in thinking that anybody could want a better dictionary than Dr. Johnson's. "Let it be called Noah's Ark," stormed *The Portfolio* in Philadelphia, "full of its foul and unclean things!" And some people who thought that an educated man should be occupying himself with politics rather than spelling called him Dr. Grammatical Institute. One editor of a newspaper was so offensive that the little, bird like gentleman challenged him to a duel. The editor declined, saying that the Doctor should be content with the English language as a weapon.

Yet what is the consequence? Webster is now the word for dictionary. The book you use is even fatter, and it is a much improved edition of the old gentleman; but a great deal of his work is there just as his tireless pen left it. Nor could the more thorough work of later days have been done without the pioneer labor of Dr. Grammatical Institute. His American Dictionary is now called The International. It is a wise change indicative of the wise change inside. For determined little Noah Webster was like the rest of our patriots in those early days. Some things he thought patriotic were not so. Though we see far more clearly than he, there are many people to-day who want to do the same thing that he did. They not only want to have America speak in her own voice, which was the wise part of his patriotism; but they want America to dispense with European culture and keep out of the current of the world's affairs, which was the bad part of his patriotism. It was good that it was no disgrace in his eyes for a word to be an Americanism; it was silly that it was a disgrace in his eyes for an American to owe anything to European civilization. And all the time the dear, bird like old gentleman was hopping up and down America in search of libraries and twittering fussily because he couldn't find enough straws to build his nest—the books he needed! And finally he had to go over to Europe to get them!

All this aggressive patriotism he put into his school-books. The growing consciousness of nationalism was more bumptious in him than in any of his contemporaries, even Fourth of July orators. This too was good and bad. His school readers were full of the speeches of the Revolutionary heroes and of American ideas, and it was well for every school child to get them by heart. But they were also full of exaggerated accounts of the greatness of America, which naturally made children brought up on them feel that the rest of the world was of no importance whatever. Unfortunate as this proved to be, however, it was perhaps the only way to develop a strong national feeling. People had already a strong Massachusetts feeling, and a strong Pennsylvania feeling, and so forth. But it was vitally important that they should get something they didn't have—a strong feeling of the nation.

If you will look into Webster's Dictionary you will find the word Websterian. It is an adjective derived from both Noah and Daniel. It means that a thing is about as solid as a thing can be. Though Daniel was born when there were no school books, he was just in time to get Noah's first one. And Noah lived long enough to put some of Daniel's great speeches into his school readers. The two Websters were very different, but their ruling idea was the same. The nation should be above everything else. It was through Daniel Webster more than through any other one man that this grim and stern New England finally desired to force home, and finally did force home, to the conscience of the nation the conviction that at all sacrifices the Union must be preserved. For this great passion of his Daniel Webster was willing to sacrifice every other principle, and he was often bitterly condemned by admirers who thought he was not valuing other principles highly enough. They thought he would be willing even to tolerate slavery if this could prevent secession. Yet when he died the nation was stirred as it had been but once before—at the death of Washington.

Daniel Webster.

V.

He was not only America's greatest orator but one of the greatest the world has ever seen. He had a powerful physique and a powerful vitality. If he sometimes, like most orators, put the sound of words before their sense, the massiveness of his personality concealed such moments as other orators could not. "You held your breath when he thundered 'Where am I to go?'" said another great orator in speaking of this physical force of his. "If he had been a small man, we would have said Who do you suppose cares where you go?" Dr. Grammatical Institute would never have ventured to ask an audience where he was to go. But besides this great natural gift he had another almost as rare in orators. The fire does not go out of his speeches when you read them to-day as does the fire of merely personal enthusiasm when the man is no longer there. Webster is present in print even though his great thunder and flashing face are gone from the platform. His eloquence lives because of his intellectual

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